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DEPARTMENT OF NURSING EDUCATION

IN CHARGE OF
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REPORT OF THE VASSAR NURSING CONFERENCE

Because of the unique nature of the Vassar Conference and the fact that so many nursing schools from many parts of the country were represented, it seems important that a fairly full report of the meetings should be presented to the readers of the JOURNAL.

It was something more than a reunion of the students of the Vassar Training Camp of 1918. For the first time in history, probably, a group of recent graduates from a number of training schools (and some students still in training) met with their superintendents and teachers and discussed quite frankly and freely some of the things which might be done to make the system of nursing training more attractive and more effective.

It is the greatest possible tribute to both groups that this could be done with so much moderation and good feeling on both sides. The students' criticisms were frank and in the main reasonable, though often based on a lack of understanding of conditions. The superintendents were sympathetic and openminded, but determined that the young graduates should face the facts of the situation and realize their own responsibility to improve the conditions they criticized. Both groups went away with a much better understanding of each other's point of view and with a better basis of coöperation for the future.

Opening of the Conference. President MacCracken could not have been more cordial in his welcome to the Alumnae of the Vassar Camp and other members of the conference. It was quite evident that Vassar College had really taken this band of nursing students to her heart and proudly counted them among her own.

Mrs. Blodgett, the Vassar trustee who was largely responsible for the original plan, spoke with great enthusiasm of the way in which all had united to carry the work through, giving special recognition to President Taft and Miss Nutting, without whom there could have been no Red Cross funds, and no working organization. She believed that the plan of such a preparatory training outside the hospital was a perfectly sound one, and that it would be extended and carried on by other colleges, especially, perhaps, by Junior Colleges such as that in Grand Rapids, where the "Vassar plan" is now being duplicated. Mrs. Blodgett also referred to the fact that the recruiting scheme which

had proven so successful in gathering together the 400 or more students for the camp in 1918 had been modified somewhat and used effectively in a recent publicity campaign in the State of Michigan.

Miss Martha Wilson, another prominent laywoman who is interested in nursing, spoke of the work of the Central Council of Nursing Education in Chicago, of which she is Chairman. This movement for the maintenance of good standards of nurse training and for the recruiting of student nurses is already familiar to readers of the JOURNAL. Miss Wilson stressed the importance of enlisting men as well as women in the movement and of getting the coöperation of the public as well as the boards of trustees of hospitals, physicians, and nurses.

Miss Nutting welcomed the recent graduates on behalf of the older members of the profession, and gave them a glimpse of the land which lies ahead of them,—a land of boundless opportunity for patriotic service, but still demanding the same courage, patience, and dedication to duty that were required in the beginning of their hospital training.

Dr. Edward H. Hume of the Hunan-Yale Medical School in China, brought a word of greeting from Miss Nina Gage, who served as Assistant Dean of the Summer Camp in 1918, and who has since returned to her work in China. He described the duties of a superintendent of nurses in a Chinese nursing school, and told of the great need and the unrivalled opportunity for service in the countries of the East, where as yet there is not more than one nurse to two million of the population.

Major Julia Stimson, of the Army Nurse Corps, a graduate of Vassar College, welcomed her adopted sisters, and told them of some of the opportunities open to them in the Army Service. In addition to the better known executive positions, the Army Nursing Service is now opening a number of positions for public health nurses, for teachers, and for laboratory and technical workers. Provision is also made for two per cent of the force to take postgraduate courses in certain hospitals and elsewhere with full tuition and maintenance.

Doctor Winslow, who was one of the most popular lecturers at the Camp, spoke briefly on the investigation of Nursing Education which is being carried on under the committee of which he is chairman, and urged the coöperation of the public and of nurses themselves in the movement toward the endowment of nursing schools which seemed to him the great hope of the future. Doctor Winslow leaves shortly for Genoa, where he will serve on the International League of Red Cross Societies.

Dean Mills, who may be considered as the "father" of the Camp,

has kept very closely in touch with all the students, and has been their wise and unfailing confidant and adviser throughout the past two years. It would be difficult to exaggerate the service which Dean Mills has rendered, not only to these young women, but to the nursing profession, for while he has never failed in sympathy for the student, he has always been most loyal to the idea on which the Camp was founded, and to the hospitals which coöperated in working out the plan.

Dean Mills reported that of the 435 young college women who began the course, 418 stayed through the first three months, and 399 reported at the various affiliating hospitals. As a result of the epidemic of influenza, seven of these lost their lives; many others returned to their former occupations or were married, leaving 169, or 42 per cent. of the whole number to complete the hospital training. The percentage of withdrawals, while somewhat higher than the usual rate in normal times, was not greater than might have been expected considering the conditions under which these young women enlisted.

The reports from superintendents of nurses of the work done by these students in the hospital were on the whole quite favorable. Some of the familiar criticisms of college women are mentioned—their critical spirit, their unwillingness to conform to routine, their lack of any marked superiority in practical work, and the inclination to consider themselves somewhat in the light of reformers. On the other hand, a substantial number of representative superintendents of nurses considered the group as a whole superior to the average and a distinct asset to both the nursing school and the profession. They mention particularly their good standing in theoretical work, their general intelligence, their earnestness, and their excellent influence on younger students. Most of the superintendents agree that they would welcome other and larger groups of the same character in their schools.

As to the future work of this group of women, Dean Mills finds that approximately half are intending to go into public health work and about one-fourth into educational or administrative work in hospitals; of the remainder, some are going into the foreign mission field, some to relief work, one or two intend to study medicine and a number have married.

Of those who withdrew, about one-third give illness as a cause, combined with family pressure; 20 per cent. felt that they were released from moral obligation after the armistice, 20 per cent. withdrew to marry or to rejoin their husbands who had returned from war, and family obligations account for another 20 per cent. A few found the work uncongenial or disappointing. Of those who withdrew, practically all speak enthusiastically of the value of the preparatory

course which they took at the College and whatever experience they had in the hospital. Apart from the scientific interest which the courses aroused, they had proven invaluable in many practical ways, had helped to make them better mothers, better home-keepers, social workers, teachers, citizens, and more healthy and useful individuals. Their interest in hospital and public health work which was aroused will be permanent. Their outlook on life will be broader, their sympathy deeper, because they had this introduction to nursing work. Several speak of that summer of the Vassar Camp as the most valuable and the happiest of their lives.

The unanimous verdict of the students as well as the observation of the College President, trustees, and officers themselves, have led them to feel that in some way they must provide for a continuation of this work in Vassar College, possibly through special summer courses, or through some extension of the regular curriculum. There is no question that, as a result of this experience, the interest of Vassar College in nursing as a vocation for college women has become a very genuine and, it is believed, a permanent one.

Session on Student Government. The first informal discussion, which was held on Friday afternoon, was on The Respective Limits of Student Government and Authoritative Control in the Training of Pupil Nurses. Miss Carrington, of Rochester General Hospital, and Miss Millman, of Bellevue, New York, represented the student group. It was evident from their talks and from the general discussion which followed that practically the entire body favored some form of student government, but there was some difference of opinion on what is meant by this term, and how far student participation was to extend. The extremists went so far as to claim the right of consultation in the organization of courses of study, in all cases of discipline, and in the general policies of the school. Those who had actually helped in working out systems of student government in hospitals were much more moderate, and realized fully, the difficulties in, first of all, enlisting the support of the student body for the new system, and then training students to carry even the lighter responsibilities they had assumed.

Miss Helen Wood, Barnes Hospital, St. Louis, gave the results of her own experience, both as a student and as a superintendent of nurses. Her conclusion was that there is little difference between a liberal form of faculty government and student government. The main essential is that there shall be sympathetic understanding and coöperation between pupils and the superintendent of nurses, and loyalty to the school and its ideals.

The failures of student government systems in nursing schools were, she felt, largely due to the general youth and inexperience of

the students, the difficulty of deciding how far student control should extend under hospital conditions, (which are so very different from conditions in schools and colleges), the emphasis on "police" duties, rather than on broader constructive policies affecting the life of the school, and the fact that responsibility has, as a rule, been centered in too few students, leaving the great majority indifferent. Miss Wood also believed that many failures could be avoided by working more slowly, the students taking over responsibilities gradually, as they prove their ability to handle them, and having always the advice and assistance of faculty representatives to fall back upon. The best feature of student government is that it provides a means of student body and faculty "getting together," understanding each other, and working closely together for the development of the school.

The general impression gathered from the body of young graduates was that they had felt some of the restrictions of hospital life to be unreasonable, especially as applied to grown-up women, and that they believed the student nurses in most schools were ready to take over more responsibility for the control of their own conduct. They felt this to be especially necessary and reasonable since student nurses are called upon to carry such heavy responsibilities for human life and, therefore, need all the more the training which student government gives. They believed the morale of the student body would be better, both off and on duty, and that greater freedom for self-expression would help in attracting a higher type of student to nursing schools.

Improvement of Courses of Study. The Saturday morning discussion was on the subject of Better Correlation between Theoretical and Practical Work in Nursing Schools. Miss Trewick, of the City Hospital, New York, and Miss Barrows, of the Presbyterian Hospital, who represented the students, brought out a number of examples of lack of system in assigning services, leaving some students with almost no experience in essential branches and very much overweighted in others. They felt it to be very unfortunate that certain desirable services, such as operating-room and public health nursing, could not be provided for all students who elected them. Students had complained of marking time in certain departments where there was little experience to be gained, when the hospital had rich resources to offer in other departments. It was suggested that if a more definite program of practical work could be arranged, and published in the circulars of nursing schools, it would give the students much more assurance that they would secure a systematic and well balanced training.

Examples were also given of the lack of correlation between theory and practice, the service often coming long before the student

had any instruction on that subject, or so long after her classes that the connection was lost. The lack of systematic teaching, especially in the wards, was felt to be a very weak point in most hospitals. Head nurses, supervisors and teachers very often fail to appreciate the fact that the pupil nurse is a student, paying for instruction, and entitled to receive every possible assistance and encouragement in acquiring her professional education. Suggestions were urged for more bedside clinics, for more opportunity to see the experimental and scientific work carried on in the hospital laboratories, and for more and better instruction on modern lines.

Miss Carolyn Gray, on behalf of the superintendents of nurses, agreed that the criticisms were entirely just and reasonable and that no one is more conscious of the weaknesses in the present system of nursing education, than are the women who have been struggling with the problem for years. She explained, however, what the dual responsibility of the superintendent of nurses means, toward the sick patients of the hospital on the one hand, and the nursing students on the other. In spite of her best efforts and all her carefully laid plans, the training of the student nurse is almost inevitably sacrificed to the immediate needs of the sick patients of the hospital and this service varies with every day and hour. The only way to avoid this incapable conflict, is to establish the school on an entirely separate basis and to provide a supplementary nursing staff for the hospital, so that it will not depend absolutely on the pupil nurses' service. Then it will be possible to put the training of the student on an educational basis, and to regulate her experience and her teaching in accordance with her educational needs without sacrificing the life and comfort of sick patients.

The same point of view was expressed by several of the other superintendents who urged the younger women to bring all their intelligence and energy to the task of working out a new system which would replace the present difficult and, in many ways unworkable, one.

Enrichment of Student Life in the Nursing School. Saturday afternoon, the discussion centered about the problem of The Enrichment of Student Life in the Training School, intellectually, recreationally, spiritually, and in its relations to the outside community. Miss Chase of University Hospital, Michigan, Miss Walker of Boston City, and Miss Whitehouse of the City Hospital, New York, spoke for the students. There seemed to be no question that there is a wide difference in the attitude of groups in various hospitals; some are happy, satisfied, and enthusiastic about their training and their life in the hospital, and some look back with something of bitterness and resentment to the whole experience. Doubtless,

some of this difference is due to the personalities of the students themselves, but it is evident that the conditions of social life and the attitude of those in authority had a great deal to do with the dominant feeling which was left in their minds. The kindly welcome, the open door of the superintendent of nurses, the frequent parties, the little diversions and recreations which were arranged for them, the opportunity to follow, even at a far distance, some of their previous interests in music, art, or literature, the chapel service, or Y. W. C. A., which gave them an opportunity for religious fellowship,—all these things served to neutralize the shocks and strains that come to all pupil nurses at times, and to leave a memory that is on the whole, happy and kindly.

A group of college women would, undoubtedly, bring with them into hospital life more resources than has the average student, but perhaps they feel even more keenly than most, the lack of those things which they have learned to depend on to enrich and brighten life. Several students spoke of the loneliness and isolation, the difficulty of adjustment to new conditions, the disillusionment of hospital life, the physical and moral strain under which student nurses work, the seeming indifference or callousness of some officers of the hospital and nursing school, the antagonism of other students, (on account of the reduction in time which college women were allowed), and the periods of almost unadulterated routine, when the vision faded and life seemed very dull and somewhat sordid. The attitude of physicians to nurses was complained of, and the lack of social recognition by the laity, as decidedly hard on morale.

Some of the concrete suggestions offered, besides those already mentioned, were the addition of some cultural course, preferably English, to the curriculum; the appointment of a special faculty adviser to "mother" each class; some arrangement for more contact between the student nurses of different hospitals; and the regular and systematic provision for recreation, for social entertainments, and for religious services. Dean Mills said that he attributed the very high morale on the Vassar Campus in 1918 to the fact that every phase of the students' life,—educational, social, physical, and spiritual, was provided for and nothing was left to chance.

Saturday night was devoted to dancing and to "stunts" which were put on by some of the hospital groups.

On Sunday, a Memorial Service was held for the students of the Camp who died in the epidemic. Miss Goodrich gave an inspiring address, rededicating them all to service, and reminding the group of their opportunities and their obligations in the face of the world's crying need. Dr. Little, a "country rector," as he called himself,

spoke very simply but with fine sincerity of the service of nurses overseas, during the war. Altogether it was an impressive and fitting conclusion to the conference which everybody felt had been, throughout, very worth while.

To the young graduate whose first vision had been somewhat dimmed, perhaps, by the hard facts of life, it meant renewed faith and enthusiasm and a clearer view of what her training might mean to her. To the older women in the profession, it brought encouragement, for although these young women were many of them critical, they were at least doing some thinking and their earnestness and energy gave hope that they would some day be a positive and constructive influence in advancing the profession. Some, at least, of the superintendents and teachers left with the feeling that if senior students and graduates of our nursing schools could have the same opportunity of threshing out their doubts and grievances with those in charge, and presenting their suggestions, it would be an excellent thing for both groups and would clear away many of the misunderstandings and the bitternesses which tend to weaken the morale of a school and keep desirable women from coming into nursing.

An experiment of this kind is to be tried by the New York City League of Nursing Education, where representatives of the senior nurses of various schools are to meet with the League members, discuss ways and means of making nursing schools more attractive and efficient. If this leads to a franker and more democratic relationship between the students and officers of even a few nursing schools, it will be a big step toward the solution of some of our training school problems.